

Testimony Opposing Reinvesting the Department of Children and Families Funding in a Locked Facility for Girls

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Appropriations Committee

February 14th, 2014

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

I am testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Connecticut Voices for Children opposes appropriating \$2.6 million to the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to fund a new locked facility for juvenile justice involved girls. This money would be better spent on programs that support children in their families and communities.¹ Our opposition to funding the girls' facility is based on the following three reasons:

First, establishing a new locked facility runs counter to national trends and risks undermining Connecticut's successful juvenile justice system reforms. The national trend in juvenile justice reform has been to move away from the creation of new secure facilities and instead to invest in evidence-based and therapeutic practices.² Connecticut has been a leader in these reforms, and has been lauded nationally for its commitment to increasing the availability of alternatives to incarceration, closing or downsizing secure facilities, and implementing gender-responsive programming.³ Between 2001 and 2011, Connecticut reduced its population of confined youth by 60 percent – the largest decline measured in a National Juvenile Justice Network 2013 study.⁴ Connecticut already has a secure locked facility for juvenile justice involved girls (Journey House). To increase the number of young women in secure facilities stands in direct contrast to the successful work Connecticut has done in reducing that very number.

Second, a locked facility is often not the most effective way to deal with girls in the juvenile justice system. Many delinquent girls have unique needs, due to high rates of trauma and victimization that often precede their offending behavior. Data from 2009 on Connecticut girls committed to DCF or on parole revealed that 52% had diagnosed trauma disorders, and 89% had more than one diagnosed psychological disorder.⁵ For these "high-need" populations, secure residential facilities are often not the most effective models for treatment; in fact, *"group care treatment cannot be found on any list of evidence-based treatments for youth with serious emotional and behavioral problems. Instead, it has sometimes been cited as a treatment that may potentially have adverse effects."*⁶ Furthermore, placing low-risk but high-need youth in deeper end placements has been found to actually increase recidivism rates.⁷ Placing young women (many of whom have trauma histories and/or mental and behavioral health needs) in a locked facility serves them neither empathetically nor effectively.⁸

Finally, rather than establishing a locked facility of questionable efficacy, Connecticut should re-invest money in the Department of Children and Families to ensure a full continuum of services for all of its youth in care. A series of recent reforms, coupled with a national trend of falling foster care populations, has led to a reduction in DCF's appropriation by \$183 million (in inflation adjusted 2013 dollars) from FY09 to FY14.⁹ While many of these reforms

(including decreased reliance on incarceration) are positive, the money DCF has saved should be reinvested in a robust array of community services to ensure that all children in the care of DCF will be successful. Experts in juvenile justice reform for girls agree that *“stemming the tide of girls’ involvement in the system requires radically expanding community and public resources for prevention and front-end diversion programs.”*¹⁰

The state should evaluate its continuum of services and re-invest saved funds to create and expand a fuller spectrum of intermediate sanctions to more effectively serve its juvenile justice system involved girls. A national evaluation of Connecticut services recommended *“increases in intermediate sanctions as an alternative to secure confinement and residential placement,”* and suggested investments be made in a variety of evidence-based practices, such as cognitive-behavioral programs, mentoring, group therapy and counseling, behavioral contracting and incentive systems, mediation, family therapy and counseling, restitution, academic programs, peer and individual counseling, and job-related programs.¹¹ Quality gender-responsive, therapeutic, and family-orientated services will help girls more effectively rehabilitate (a primary goal of the juvenile justice system) and successfully reintegrate into their home communities.

Before funding a new locked facility for girls, the state should evaluate, amend, and strengthen the full array of services for all children in the care of DCF. The overall reduction of the DCF budget coupled with the simultaneous increase in the budget for the new locked facility is a step backwards for Connecticut’s juvenile justice system.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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- ¹ See Kenneth Feder, Matthew Santacroce, and Sharon Langer, JD, M.Ed., "Testimony Opposing Reduced Appropriations for the Department of Children and Families," Connecticut Voices for Children, (February 2014).
- ² See e.g., Dr. Mark W. Lipsey, Dr. James C. Howell, Marion R. Kelly, Dr. Gabrielle Chapman, and Darin Carver, "Improving the Effectiveness of Juvenile Justice Programs: A New Perspective on Evidence-Based Practice," Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, (December 2010), available at: <http://cjjr.georgetown.edu/resources2/cjjrpublications/ebppaper.html>; "The Comeback States: Reducing Youth Incarceration in the United States," National Juvenile Justice Network and Texas Public Policy Foundation, (June 2013), available at: <http://www.njjn.org/our-work/the-comeback-states-reducing-juvenile-incarceration-in-the-united-states>.
- ³ See e.g., Liz Watson and Peter Edelman, "Improving the Juvenile Justice System For Girls: Lessons from the States," Georgetown Center on Poverty, Inequality and Public Policy, (October 2012), available at: http://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/poverty-inequality/upload/JDS_V1R4_Web_Singles.pdf; "Juvenile Justice Reform in Connecticut: How Collaboration and Commitment Have Improved Public Safety and Outcomes for Youth," Justice Policy Institute, (February 2013), available at: http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/jpi_juvenile_justice_reform_in_ct.pdf; "Turning It Around: Successes and Opportunities in Juvenile Justice," National Juvenile Justice Network and Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, available at: <http://www.njjn.org/uploads/digital-library/turning.pdf>; "The Comeback States: Reducing Youth Incarceration in the United States," National Juvenile Justice Network and Texas Public Policy Foundation, (June 2013), available at: <http://www.njjn.org/our-work/the-comeback-states-reducing-juvenile-incarceration-in-the-united-states>.
- ⁴ "The Comeback and Coming-from-Behind States: An Update on Youth Incarceration in the United States," National Juvenile Justice Network and Texas Public Policy Foundation, (December 2013), available at: <http://www.njjn.org/uploads/digital-library/The-Comeback-and-Coming-from-Behind-States.pdf>.
- ⁵ Data from DCF Bureau of Juvenile Services (DCF girlsghinfoin 1-18-09.xls), available at: <http://www.ctjja.org/resources/pdf/GirlsInCTJJSysstem.pdf>.
- ⁶ Sigrid James, "What Works in Group Care? – A Structured Review of Treatment Models for Group Homes and Residential Care," Children and Youth Services Review (February 2011); 33(2): 308-321, available at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3314708/>.
- ⁷ Michael Baglivio, "Briefing Report: The Risk Principle," Florida Department of Juvenile Justice Research and Planning, (March 2013), available at: <http://www.djj.state.fl.us/docs/research2/briefing-report-the-risk-principle.pdf?sfvrsn=0>.
- ⁸ For more on young women in Connecticut's juvenile justice system, see Marty Beyer, Ph.D., "A System of Services for Girls in Connecticut," (December 2005), available at: <http://www.kidscounsel.org/Beyer%20Report%20Final%202005%2012%2015.pdf>. Dr. Beyer states: "Perhaps the failure to serve girls is linked to the emphasis on building beds rather than meeting individual needs and encouraging talents... Without investing in significant change in core beliefs and practices in child welfare, behavioral health, probation, and parole staff, public and private provider staff, and schools, Connecticut will continue to produce girls in crisis who are seen as requiring a move to a secure state-run facility to prevent harming others or running away."
- ⁹ See Kenneth Feder, Matthew Santacroce, and Sharon Langer, JD, M.Ed., "Testimony Opposing Reduced Appropriations for the Department of Children and Families," Connecticut Voices for Children, (February 2014).
- ¹⁰ Liz Watson and Peter Edelman, "Improving the Juvenile Justice System For Girls: Lessons from the States," Georgetown Center on Poverty, Inequality and Public Policy, (October 2012), available at: http://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/poverty-inequality/upload/JDS_V1R4_Web_Singles.pdf.
- ¹¹ Marion R. Kelly, MSW, James C. Howell, Ph.D., and Kristen Johnson, Ph.D., "Preliminary Report for the State of Connecticut," CT Department of Children and Families, (June 2013). A copy of this text is available upon request.

